Murdoch scandal: Rebekah Brooks charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice

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Former editor Rebekah Brooks and her husband, Charlie, are two of six people charged yesterday in connection with the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal.

The six face prosecution for conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, with charges relating to hiding material from Scotland Yard detectives that includes seven boxes from the archives of News International, other documents, computers and electronic equipment in July last year.

A statement by Alison Levitt QC, principal legal adviser to the Director of Public Prosecutions, declared that Brooks faces three conspiracy charges and all the others charged face one. The charges brought against Brooks, her husband and several immediate associates are the first laid during the 18-month investigation against any of the more than 40 people who remain on police bail. It brings the scandal over the phone hacking of celebrities, politicians and hundreds of others to the very top of Rupert Murdoch's News International and its international parent, News Corporation.

The maximum penalty for perverting the course of justice is life in prison, but generally involves sentences of several years.

Brooks was editor of the *News of the World* from 2000 to 2003, when the voicemails on murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler's mobile phone were intercepted, before moving to the *Sun*. A close protégé of multibillionaire Murdoch, she was made chief executive of News International in 2009 before resigning in July 2011. She was arrested on July 17, 2011 by detectives working on Operation Weeting, relating to phone hacking, and Operation Elveden, examining illicit payments to police officers. She was rearrested on March 13 this year on suspicion of conspiring to pervert the course of justice.

Those charged alongside Brooks include her personal assistant Cheryl Carter, chauffeur Paul Edwards, security man Daryl Jorsling and News International head of security Mark Hanna. Carter worked with Brooks for 19 years, including during her time as editor of the *News of the World* and the *Sun*. Hanna became head of security at News International in 2009 and is still employed by Murdoch's company.

The first charge against Rebekah Brooks is that between July 6 and July 19, 2011 she conspired with Charlie Brooks, Carter, Hanna, Edwards, Jorsling and "persons unknown" to conceal material from police officers. Rebekah Brooks and Carter are accused of having "conspired together permanently" between July 6 and 9 last year to remove material from the News International archive. Both of the Brookses, Hanna, Edwards and Jorsling are accused of conspiring between July 15 and July 19, 2011, to "conceal documents, computers and other electronic equipment".

All charges against a seventh man, a security consultant, were dropped.

The charges raise acute political difficulties for the present coalition government.

Charlie Brooks, a racehorse trainer, is an Old Etonian and a longstanding and close friend of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, together with other members of the so-called "Chipping Norton set" in Oxfordshire.

Rebekah Brooks was also an intimate of Cameron, other Tories, Labour politicians—including Tony Blair and his wife Cherie—and top police officers at Scotland Yard. Her 2009 wedding to Charlie Brooks was

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attended by former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Cameron.

On Friday, Rebekah Brooks gave evidence before the Leveson Inquiry into press ethics, during which she made embarrassing statements demonstrating her personal closeness to Cameron at a time when the Tories are under scrutiny as to whether they agreed to green-light Murdoch's now thwarted plan to purchase a majority stake in the satellite broadcaster BSkyB.

Brooks admitted to meeting Cameron at 22 semi-official events during the past six years, 13 of which took place while he was seeking the support of Murdoch's media empire prior to taking office. Brooks' replacement as *News of the World* editor, Andy Coulson, was hired as the Tory party's director of communications on July 9, 2007, according to the *Daily Mail*, after she lobbied on his behalf. Coulson then became Cameron's director of communications after the May 2010 election victory, while still being paid by News International.

During the election campaign, Brooks and Cameron were in constant contact, exchanging texts that Cameron signed either "DC" or "LOL"—believing this stood for "lots of love". Cameron sent Brooks a "keep your head up" message at the height of the hacking scandal when she was forced to quit her job.

Of particular significance are the personal meetings, with invites to the prime minister's country residence at Chequers on three occasions in 2010 that included a Boxing Day (post-Christmas) party. Three days later, on December 29, she entertained Cameron at her home. All these meetings took place at a time when the BSkyB bid was being considered, and Brooks revealed the issue was discussed.

In her testimony to the Leveson Inquiry, Brooks also said that she had discussed the bid more extensively with Chancellor George Osborne at a restaurant in December 2010. The following day she emailed News Corporation lobbyist Frédéric Michel to the effect that Osborne had expressed "total bafflement" at the media regulator Ofcom's negative response to the £8 billion bid.

Cameron's culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt, already stands accused of colluding with News Corporation over the BSkyB bid—accusations that have led his special adviser Adam Smith to fall on his sword.

On May 10, Brooks disclosed an email that suggested this collusion also included efforts to prevent a public inquiry and asked how the government should respond to the mounting phone hacking scandal.

Michel wrote June 27 last year that "JH" was poised to make an "extremely helpful" statement about the company's proposed acquisition of BSkyB and that it would be approved despite the phone-hacking. "JH", Michel wrote to Brooks, was "looking into phone-hacking/practices more thoroughly" and had "asked me to advise him privately in the coming weeks and guide his and No 10's [the prime minister's] positioning".

"JH" believed "phone hacking has nothing to do with the media plurality issues", Michel wrote, and "wants to prevent a public inquiry".

Michel has said that his references to "JH" referred to information obtained from Adam Smith.

At least two police officers are under scrutiny, after another two files were handed over to prosecutors alleging they charged for "advice" on "allegation of misconduct in a public office" and "other associated matters".

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